



FREE READ

IT TAKES  
A THIEF

J.B. KNOWLES

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**Oathtaker**

[Broken](#)

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It takes a Thief

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IT TAKES A  
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# Chapter One

Katya dressed quickly, her excellent night vision making the task easy, and the soft leather armour she wore made no sound as she put it on. She slipped a rolled-up piece of parchment from an inside pocket and left it on the bedside table.

The note was a key part of her plan.

She picked up her weapons pack and slowly opened the door, silently thanking the innkeeper for his attention to maintenance and elimination of creaks. After taking one more peek into the room to make sure her bedmate was soundly asleep, she slipped into the hallway leading to the main part of the inn.

Passing the attached tavern, she glanced inside. The roaring had died to embers; just enough to illuminate the few overindulgers passed out at tables or on the floor.

She approached the deserted front of the house. A bell attached to the outside of the inn could be used by travellers arriving at this late hour if they didn't mind incurring the innkeeper's wrath, who no doubt would

have not only harsh words, but a few coins tacked on as a 'service fee.'

Before opening the main door, she glanced around. No one moving, no sounds, no signs of life. Satisfied, she gently lifted the catch and opened the door, sliding through the opening as soon as it was wide enough, then closing it behind her.

The street, while not brightly lit, wasn't pitch black either. Katya crouched low and moved to a patch of shadow in the stable across the street. When she was surrounded by darkness, she took in the whole picture of the inn, looking for anything she'd missed or out of place. All was as it should be.

The first part of her plan was a success.

Katya grinned. 'Plan.' She had never 'planned' on finding herself in a relationship, but she had been immediately taken with Amrada, a paladin who had been an integral part of the ceremony at which Katya had joined the Council of the Blood Oath. In fact, it had been Amrada who had applied the magical brand to Katya's wrist, marking her an Oathed warrior and creating a bond between them that would never be forgotten.

The note she had left for Amrada to read said that the elf had gotten up early, not out of character at all for Katya, and was going to spend the day in the nearby forests, training and collecting supplies to make poisons, medicines and antidotes. She felt confident she had an alibi until nightfall to carry out her mission.

Her very unofficial and unauthorized mission.

It had started with a letter that had made its way to Katya through the courier system that the Council used across the continent of Nakall. The letter had been marked as 'Private' and 'Urgent' in a hand that Katya did not recognize.

She had opened it immediately, reading through it with curiosity that quickly turned to shock, then anger. Since then, she had read it often enough she had practically memorized the contents.

*Dear Mistress Greenleaf,*

*My Sisters and I are of the Order of Ralmis.*

Katya had immediately recognized the name of one of the more-worshipped gods of Nakall, the goddess of light and learning.

*We run a small school in the goddess' name on the shores of the great sea, a few days' walk from Fandalore. Our students are all girls, many of whom have been shunned by their families for having radical ideas such as seeking equality for their futures or attempting to study an area that their families believe are limited to men.*

*This school may be familiar to you as one that your family has long been a patron of.*

It was true. Her family had long made it a point to use much of the income from Greenleaf Traders to support various charities and causes both here and across the seas where the company's large fleet of trading ships ventured. She guessed that her brother Elias had had a hand in this request.

*One of the cornerstones of our school is a small statue of Ralmis, passed through generations of our Order and blessed by the goddess herself when she possessed a mortal form. The statue, made of simple blue stone, has very little material value but is of great spiritual significance.*

*Until recently, the statue sat in the school chapel. A few days ago, we received a pounding on our door in the middle of the night. When I answered, thinking it was a traveller in need of assistance, he pushed his way in, followed by several others of what turned out to be brigands.*

*For some reason, they believed that there were valuables in the school. After ransacking the building and terrifying both*

*the students and the other Sisters, they took a few coins from the strongbox and the statue of Ralmis.*

*The coins are of no consequence, but the statue represents the foundation of our teachings. We have been told that the brigands responsible are holed up in a chain of caves not far from the coast. Although they are apparently less than a dozen in number, they are extremely active.*

*We are asking for your help to recover our precious statue. We can pay very little but are hoping that the reputation of both the Greenleaf family and the Oathtakers is true and that you are possessed of both the character and talents that your brother feels you have.*

*As she thought, Elias' doing.*

*We do have one request which may be unusual for a warrior such as yourself. Although we hold great sadness over the theft of our goddess, Ralmis teaches forgiveness and light. With her teachings in mind, we would ask that you recover our statue without killing any of the brigands, despicable as they may be.*

When Katya had first read that, she was almost inclined to disregard the request. Take on a group of filthy thieves without killing any of them? That was not generally the Oathtaker way, unless there was some tactical reason for it.

The more she considered, however, the more she warmed to the idea. The infiltration itself wouldn't be an issue but coming up with ways to take the brigands out non-lethally would be a chance to try out some new tactics and tools.

*In the far reaches of our school grounds, there is a large stone shrine to Ralmis. The base of the shrine is hollow. We will leave a small sack of gold there for you, as well as a map to the cave system that was provided to us and check daily to see if it has been removed. When you retrieve the goddess, she can be left in the same spot.*

*We understand the work of the Oathtakers is substantial, and that we are a very small group in the world. But we need a hero and we pray it is you. We thank you, Mistress Greenleaf, and impart all the blessings of Ralmis.*

*The Sisters of the Order of Ralmis.*

Katya decided to undertake this task, one which she didn't feel the need to advise her mentor Shira or anyone else from the Oathtakers about. The circumstances, the affront to such a noble goddess and the disrespect shown to a group of devout women whose cause Katya supported made this mission a personal one.

Getting rid of the brigands for the greater good would simply be a bonus.

Although it had taken a few weeks, Katya had managed to get her party to settle for a few days near the school – the inn was less than two hours brisk walk to the school grounds. With the brigands raiding at night, it stood to reason most of them would be asleep during the day, probably with a rotating guard arrangement. So, a daytime raid it was.

Katya had made casual inquiries around town and had been able to confirm that there was indeed a nest of brigands that had taken over a nearby cave system, and that the local guards didn't seem inclined to do anything about them. That was good information to have confirmed. Although, she would have loved a more detailed map of the caves.

She made it to the school grounds in good time, passing nothing on the roads and trails aside from the occasional forest animal, and quickly found the shrine. It was lit by four oil lamps, one at each side. Katya knelt next to the shrine's base, examining it. She noticed a conspicuous brass ring that appeared to be simply a decoration. Taking a guess, she pulled firmly on the ring,

finding that the thin stone face over the hollow swung open.

She reached in to pick up a small cloth sack and opened it to find ten gold coins. She smiled. In the few months she had been with the Oathtakers, Katya had already secreted away various valuables worth thousands of gold pieces, deposited at various stronghouses across Nakall. Returning anything they could to its proper owner then splitting the remaining proceeds of their adventures was a standard Oathtaker process, allowing members to maintain the weapons, armour and other costs associated with fighting the forces of darkness.

She did, however, appreciate the sincerity the Sisters had shown.

Katya emptied the coins from the sack, then stacked them next to the empty bag in the hollow. A few feet away, the clearing the shrine sat in gave way to forest. Katya moved to the nearest tree and plucked a sprout from a branch. She laid the leaf next to the coins, hoping that the Sisters would pick up on the wordless clue she was leaving that she had come and gone.

Finally, Katya removed the map. The sky was starting to lighten, to the point that she could read the parchment without needing night vision. Although the map was crude, it portrayed enough information for her to get a bearing on the cave entrance.

The cave system was less than an hour's walk from the school. No doubt the brigands had roamed the area around the caves, cleaning out any unfortunates who happened to be in their path. Katya had no idea if the thieves were dedicated to any specific cause, or just stole and pillaged for their own benefit. She had run across both sorts during her time as an Oathtaker, but usually

they were larger and more organized groups that presented more of a threat. This seemed to be a small group who liked living off the backs of others.

Heading for the caves, Katya smiled. She would illustrate to this group why they had made a poor decision raiding the school.

She approached the caves through a thickly wooded area, a more difficult route most wouldn't use, especially when there was a convenient path that led right to the brigand's hideout. She was thinking like a thief, though, especially one who would hide out in a cave, and realized the path was a bit too convenient. The easy way usually turned out to be the most dangerous.

Being able to think like this, to put herself into the boots of her opponents, was one of her greatest gifts as a warrior; her mentor Shira often said if he could design a fighting machine, he would use Katya as the foundation for it.

Sure enough, as the woods started to thin into a meadow, edged by many paths well-worn by the passing of boots, Katya started to notice tricks that would take the unwary adventurer or forager by surprise.

A thin vine stretched across a gap between two trees, an obvious spot to walk through. She followed the course of the vine into the trees, under a large root, and up to a trigger stick. A large stump sat perched against the trigger stick, positioned so that it would fall directly onto anyone who broke the vine.

A reasonably well-hidden pit covered with a thin layer of sticks and leaves.

A branch tied back that would whip out into whoever kicked a lever-like spike hidden in the underbrush.

Stepping gingerly, Katya made a note to come back and disarm the traps after she had finished with the thieves.

She moved to the edge of the woods and started to kneel behind a massive fallen tree. It would be ideal for observing the now visible entrance to the cave.

Before getting into place, though, she stopped. The stump was too perfect, too ideally laid out. She looked carefully at the base of the tree, noticing it had been cut down at the roots and put into position, making it look like it had fallen on its own. A quick glance at the tree as opposed to the more careful scrutiny Katya was giving it would certainly reinforce this illusion.

She moved back a few feet and got down on her hands and knees, lowering her head. Carefully searching the area under the tree, it took her only a few seconds to spot the delicate strands of a web.

She smiled grimly. Traps didn't always have to be made at the hand of intelligent creatures, just cunning ones. She picked up a small branch and gently tossed it into the webbing.

She was immediately rewarded with a spray of dirt erupting from the ground, as a mottled brown and red spider about the size of her hand burst from its hiding spot, seeking the prey that had disturbed its web. Had there been an insect, small rodent, or even a bird present, in a flash it would have received a very painful venomous bite, quickly leading to paralysis of the unfortunate creature and allowing the spider to wrap up and consume the prize at its leisure.

The bite of the Hollowcore spider wasn't fatal to larger animals but was still extremely painful. In large enough doses, for example from multiple spiders, it would paralyze bigger creatures, but most commonly a single

bite would cause dizziness and nausea. In some instances, this would be so debilitating that bite victims would collapse, leading them to be vulnerable to being attacked by enemies or predators.

Her estimation of these brigands went up a notch. They had noticed the spider's hiding spot and set up what appeared to be an ideal place for someone to watch their comings and goings, with a built-in means of weeding out spies or intruders.

Katya got up and sought another spot, giving the spider a wide berth. She held no ill will towards it. You couldn't blame a creature for doing what instinct told it to do.

She spotted another place where she could tuck herself away to survey the cave entrance. She crouched between two slender trees and let her black armour blend into the shadowed area. Although the sun had grown higher in the sky, the trees were thick enough that the forest floor still held many patches of darkness.

After taking a few deep breaths, she allowed her eyes to naturally roam across the area, letting her subconscious note details that would be key to her infiltration.

She had to admit, it was a solid setup.

The entrance to the cave was a simple half-circle in the tall stoneface of a sheer cliff. One brigand wearing mixed armour pieces leaned against the wall next to the entrance, his eyes closed. Katya guessed that they had very few visitors and as a result the guards, or at least this guard, had grown lazy and complacent.

Or gave that impression at least. It was tough to tell which at this point.

She looked carefully for a secondary guard hidden among the rocks and boulders strewn along the base of

the cliff, ultimately concluding that there wasn't one – at least outside. She didn't see any flashes of sunlight off metal, saw no movements of someone stretching or repositioning.

Satisfied that she only had the one guard to contend with for the time being, Katya turned her mind to getting into the cave. She would be moving from bright sunlight into extreme darkness, and even with her vision it would take a few seconds for her eyes to adjust. In that few seconds someone could easily get to her and put a blade between her ribs.

Katya's rough map showed a chamber just inside the entrance, followed by a long hallway leading into the larger interior chambers. Measurements, even paces, would have been great, but Oathtakers were if nothing else, pragmatic. She'd use what she had.

She knelt and opened her weapons pack. Katya normally preferred an elven longbow, but for this occasion she had brought a modified crossbow with her. The bow fired darts, not bolts, allowing Katya versatility that was in line with the Sisters' request that she not take any lives.

She strung the crossbow and opened a smaller padded case containing an array of darts. Picking out one with yellow stabilizing feathers, she loaded it into the weapon. Katya wasn't at an optimal distance for a small crossbow but moving any closer to the guard would take her completely out of cover. It would be a compromise.

Katya wasn't a huge fan of compromise; generally preferring things be black and white.

She removed a dart with red feathers and laid it on the ground next to her, ready to be launched next.

She laid the crossbow's sight over the guard, glad that she had added the small silver tube that served to

magnify her aim. She placed the dot in the middle of the tube's view over the guard's throat, held her breath, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

The impact was almost instant. The dart struck the guard's neck, and he slapped the spot, believing he had been bitten by some sort of insect. He removed the dart, looking at it quizzically, before yelling in surprise.

Without taking her eyes off the guard, Katya felt for the red dart and loaded it.

The slow-acting sleeping toxin on the yellow dart was having the desired effect. It allowed enough time for the guard to shout for help but was potent enough to already have him slumping.

As Katya hoped, another guard ran from the cave entrance, sword in hand, asking his companion what was happening. He shielded his eyes, temporarily blinded by the sunlight, and Katya shot him with the red dart. Its toxin was much quicker-acting, and within a few seconds the guard had collapsed to the ground without uttering another sound.

Katya quickly loaded another red dart in case a third guard emerged from the cave. Keeping in mind that the Sisters believed that there were only around a dozen of the brigands and putting at least one wherever the emergency exit would be, she couldn't imagine anymore than the two guards up front. The group seemed, based on the casual nature of the primary guard, very overconfident tucked away in their cave, surrounded by thick forest and traps.

She waited for a full thirty seconds before she moved out of her hiding place, crossbow still in hand, and headed towards the cave opening. Picking her way across the rocky meadow, but still moving quickly, she crossed the open space to the mouth of the cave, then

tucked herself tightly against the wall, not far from where the first guard lay.

This next bit was the trickiest, yet most essential, piece of the mission. She would be at a tremendous disadvantage, moving from the brightly lit clearing into the darkness of the cave. There was, however, another tool in her arsenal that would help even the odds if there was indeed someone waiting in the darkness.

She removed a soft capsule, made from a seedpod and about the size of a walnut, from her weapons pack, then squeezed it to mix the two carefully measured chemicals inside. She counted to three, leaned out and tossed the capsule into the cave, then counted three again.

A muffled thump could be heard from inside the cave, accompanied by a brilliant flash of light apparent even through her closed eyes. She moved quickly for the cave opening, keeping her eyes slitted to balance the light and dark and giving her natural night vision a head start. Anyone who was standing within thirty feet of the opening and who had been looking towards it when Katya's small bomb went off would have been overwhelmed by the brightness, destroying their own night vision, and giving the elf a few seconds advantage.

With a short fighting stick in one hand and her crossbow in the other, Katya slipped around the lip of the cave mouth, smooth as oil, and ducked down as soon as she was surrounded by darkness. She was able to see that she was in a chamber, maybe ten feet wide, and by herself. At the back of the stone room was a doorway that led to a long, mostly straight corridor, lit by torches.

It was also empty.

Katya was surprised, expecting to see at least one brigand standing either in the chamber or in the corridor,

rubbing their eyes to bring their vision back quickly. All the better for her.

She held the crossbow at eye level and began to move in a crouch down the rocky corridor, hugging the wall, making no sound as she walked. The corridor widened slightly as she approached its other end, which looked like it opened into the first of the large caves of the hideout. Based on the flickering orange and yellow light, a large fire was burning in there.

Katya moved sideways across the corridor, giving her a wider and wider view of the large cavern, comfortable in knowing that anyone on watch would be looking from the fire-lit cave into the dimmer torchlight surrounding her, again at a disadvantage for sight.

Stopping next to the last torch on the wall before the corridor's end, she reached out and pinched the wick between two leather-gloved fingers, killing the flame. She then moved to the next torch back, repeating the action and plunging about half the length of the corridor into darkness.

Then she waited.

Her patience was rewarded after a few minutes, when she could hear two different voices in the larger cavern yelling at each other to check the torches. After a final torrent of powerful cursewords, she could see a figure slowly trudge up what must have been a set of stairs. Katya could only make out a silhouette, but it was clearly moving towards where she was hiding.

This next bit was a gamble, and she had two different plans in mind dependant on which torch the disgruntled torch-lighter moved to.

As he drew nearer to the corridor, it was apparent from his body language and pace of movement that he wasn't going to stop at the first unlit torch. *Perfect.*

Katya moved as close to him as she could while staying in darkness. As the brigand approached, he was muttering to himself and fumbling around at his waist, probably for a flint and steel, unconcerned as to why two torches had gone out at virtually the same time.

While not a fatal mistake, it was one that would cost him. As he prepared to strike his flint, Katya quickly closed the gap between the two, using the tip of her fighting stick to strike two separate nerves in the man's shoulders. The combination caused instant unconsciousness that would last a few hours.

Katya let the man collapse to the floor, the leather and cloth armour he wore barely making a sound as he did. She ticked another brigand off the roster of them she was keeping in her head and moved towards the light of the large cave.

She stopped just short of the entrance, letting her eyes again adjust to the changing light, before taking a quick peek into the cavern. As she had suspected, there was a massive fire burning in the centre. Two brigands sat around it on rough stone benches, drinking.

She ducked her head back into the darkness, waited a few seconds, stood, and peeked around the corner again so she would emerge in a new spot. Precautions kept you alive.

Katya took a bit more time surveying the scene, confident that the light from the fire was weak where she was; combined with the colour of the rock and the shadows around her she felt safely camouflaged.

The two brigands were dressed like all the others, but both held ornate silver goblets that looked like plunder from some estate house. There was a third goblet sitting on one of the benches and Katya guessed that it belonged to the now unconscious torch lighter.

A path a few steps wide lay in front of her, leading to another dark opening across the cave. The fire was in a large pit, a wide stairway carved into the rock leading down into it. She couldn't see any other entrances or exits into the pit.

She weighed the options of taking out the two brigands by the fire against simply crossing the cave to the opening across the way, which had to lead to the rest of the caves. Ultimately, she decided against dealing with the brigands; it would be quicker and quieter to simply sneak across to the other side.

It took her only a few seconds to do so. Just in case, she had loaded a red bolt into the crossbow, knowing if needed it would knock one target out and give her a few seconds of confusion to get to the other one.

She made it across with no alarm being raised and stopped to let her vision prepare for the very dark corridor she was moving into. Unlike the similar corridor she had first entered, this one had no torchlight.

This corridor was longer than the first, with three doorways. Without solid information, she would simply have to try all three to see what went where.

Before she moved, she searched as well as possible for any traps – tripwires, pressure plates, trapdoors...there could be anything awaiting her. While elven night vision was good, it wasn't perfect, so she would still have to have all her wits about her as she moved through the hallway.

Now dwarves. There was a race with amazing night eyes. Any one of them could have pranced through these caves without a care.

Seeing nothing apparent, she moved to the first opening, along the wall to her left. She walked with her arms up, on either side of her face, offering both

protection for her head in the event of an unexpected attack as well as a way of feeling for anything hanging or poking out at eye level. She knew of more than one unwary adventurer who had lost an eye running through the dark without taking any precautions.

The opening led into a kind of barracks room, slightly lit by a sputtering oil lamp. By the weak light, Katya could see that there were three brigands asleep in a room that would accommodate eight.

Crouching down, she removed the red dart from the crossbow, and took another from her pack, as well as one yellow one.

She moved to the closest bed, holding the dart like a dagger. She clamped her hand on the sleeping brigand's mouth as she jabbed him with the quick sleep toxin. He never even opened his eyes.

The thief in the next bed was a lighter sleeper who opened his eyes and attempted to speak before the toxin kicked in, his few words muffled by Katya's hand.

Finally, she moved to the last sleeping brigand. He had begun to stir, possibly awoken by his comrade's noise, and just before Katya reached the bedside, he sat up.

In confusion, he looked around, taking in the scene. "What...?"

Before he could say another word, Katya slammed her hand over his mouth, forcing his head back against the wall. She held the tip of the yellow dart to his neck but didn't pierce the skin. "Stop moving."

Eyes wide, the bandit did so, as he realized his situation.

"If you stay very quiet and answer a few questions, you'll survive. Do you understand?"

The brigand, much younger than the others, nodded his head.

“Good. First. Is the storeroom or wherever you keep the stuff you steal the room at the end of corridor?”

Another nod of yes.

“Is it locked?”

He indicated yes. That held no concern — she had a full set of picks with her.

“What about the other room? Are there people in there?”

Yes.

“With one hand, I want you to very slowly show me how many.”

The brigand swallowed deeply, then held up one finger.

“Just one?”

He nodded.

Hmmm. “Is it the chief’s room?”

Another nod.

“You’re doing fine. Is there a back exit?”

Yes.

She thought for a moment, brow furrowed. “Is it in the firepit room?” She hadn’t noticed any doors or openings when she had snuck past.

He nodded.

“Is the passageway hidden somehow?”

Yes.

“Is it guarded at the other end?”

Yes.

“Show me again how many.”

He displayed one finger.

“Excellent. You did very well. You’re going to go back to sleep now.” She jabbed the dart into the brigand’s neck.

Before he passed out, Katya spoke once more. "This is no life for someone your age, boy. When you wake up, I suggest you rethink the company you keep."

He slumped back into unconsciousness, and Katya crept back to the doorway. After a quick peek to ensure that she hadn't been noticed or that there wasn't a guard wandering by, she made her way to the far end of the hall, finding herself face to face with a large wooden door.

The door and its frame appeared to have been removed from a strongroom or vault in some other building and then simply wedged into the walls of the corridor. Deep dents, like those a warhammer would make as it struck, were visible in the wood of the frame, supporting her theory.

The lock, though old, was secure enough to stop the average person, likely even the average adventurer.

Katya wasn't worried.

She removed a leather bundle from a pocket in her leggings. Kneeling to be at eye level with the lock, she unrolled the bundle to reveal an impressive array of skeleton keys, lockpicks, levers and gears. She selected a metal probe whose handle was about the size of her thumb but tapered to a fine point, and deftly inserted it into the lock.

She worked primarily by feel and sound, getting a picture in her mind of how the lock was constructed. It was simple but strong. A piece of notched metal behind the lock's housing secured a large metal bolt in place. In turn, the bolt secured the door by fitting into a hole that had to have been drilled into the rock wall.

She removed the probe and swapped it for a small crowbar and an even smaller leather pouch. Apart from one corner held closed with a spring, the leather was

sealed with wax, letting it hold a small quantity of oil that Katya created herself from a blend of fruits and plants.

She squeezed the pouch gently, dribbling the oil onto the crowbar, and put a few drops into the keyhole for good measure. She fitted the crowbar into the keyhole and slowly levered the notch up and off the bolt. After a few seconds, she felt the notch move as far as it could.

Holding the bar in place with her left hand, she grabbed the lever of the lock with her right. Praying that the oil would take care of any rustiness or grinding, she slid the bolt open. Aside from a small scraping noise of metal against rock, the bolt moved smoothly. It appeared that the lock was used often enough to keep it in good working order.

Although the door weighed several hundredweights, Katya opened it without too much strain—elves were, measure for measure, stronger than most humans their size—and she pulled until the door was just short of clanging into the wall.

Thinking back to the Hollowcore spider's webbing, she checked the entirety of the doorway for any triplines or alarms. Surprisingly, she found nothing. Apparently, the brigands felt no one would ever get this far without either raising an alarm or being stumped by the door.

Katya smiled. She loved when she was able to confound an enemy's expectations.

Before moving into the room, she used one last tool from her thief's kit, a simple chunk of very dense, very hard wood, and wedged it into the bolthole in the wall. The idea was to make the bolthole unusable, at least for one or two efforts at resecuring the door, giving her enough time to get back to the doorway to deal with whoever was trying to shut her in.

Not that it concerned her too much. After all, there was also a bolt handle on this side of the door, but she would always take any advantage she could get.

She slipped through the doorway into pitch blackness, which made sense. Why constantly light up a strongroom that only one or two people likely had the key to when you could just bring a torch in as needed? Stopping a few steps into the room, she swung the door closed, again halting it before it boomed to a stop.

Satisfied that she had left the door looking as normal as possible, she took from a pocket on her armour a new toy she was most excited to try. It had cost her more than a few gold pieces, and several nights in the company of an alchemist who had said that he worked much better when drunk—which had also improved his self-confidence, as he'd made countless suggestive comments to Katya—but she now had what she hoped would be a new advantage for the Oathtaker arsenal.

It was a glass vial, wrapped in several layers of special cloth and sealed at the top with a glass stopper and very sticky tree sap. The vial was split into two sections, separated by a thin wax layer. On one side was a light blue liquid, on the other a bright yellow oil.

Katya held the middle of the tube, where the wax was. It was so thin that the heat from her hand would melt it in less than a minute. That was also the reason it was wrapped in enchanted cloth, to prevent her body heat or even heat from the sun from warming it before it was to be used.

As she watched, the wax slowly petered away, letting the colours start to swirl. The yellow oil, being thicker, slowly crept in tendrils into the liquid. Katya shook the vial, mixing the contents and crossed her fingers.

Within a few seconds, a blue-green light started to come from the tube, bright enough to enhance her night vision but not bright enough to overwhelm it. She could now easily see details in the room around her.

She smiled. She owed the old alchemist a bottle of his favourite wine. Somehow, he had successfully figured out how to create the same kind of liquid that many insects, fish and birds across Nakall used to glow in the darkness.

Holding the glowing tube like a torch, she headed to the back of the storeroom. She planned on a methodical sweep of the large room – simply poking here and there for the small statue wouldn't get her anywhere.

It was a very eclectic collection of loot, making it look like the brigands took whatever they could get their hands on. While there were certainly items of value in the room, including coin, jewellery and art, neatly stacked, and accounted for, those stacks were scattered among more mundane things: cookware, chairs, cups and bowls, even chamber pots.

*Amateurs.*

Although the room was reasonably full, the sparkly blue stone of the statue eventually stood out under the glow of Katya's tube. It was laying against a wall among a pile of dinner plates and what appeared to be curtains, apparently not important enough to warrant any kind of attention like the other pieces of statuary.

Katya's bemusement at the slapdash approach of the brigands turned rapidly to anger. The fact that the form of such a noble goddess had been simply cast aside among the everyday items these idiots had stolen enraged the elf.

Shira often told her that her quick temper was one of her potential downfalls, and she worked diligently to

keep her emotions separate from her combat skills, but in this case, she let the anger come. *Who are these fools to loot and pillage from anyone, let alone a peaceful order of holy women?*

On some level, Katya realized that anger ran counter to that same order's peaceful teachings, but she would reconcile that with herself later.

Katya's plan had originally been to simply take the statue with her, tucked away inside of her armour, and return it. Now, however, with a fire burning inside her, she changed her mind.

Looking around the room for something that would let her carry more with her, she spotted a large sack, like a farmer would use to carry produce to market. Not ideal, but it would do.

Grabbing the sack and roughly opening it, and holding the glow tube gingerly in her teeth, she began to shovel coins and jewellery into the bag. The art pieces and other items would have to stay put for now.

After filling the bag with as much as she could reasonably carry, including a stack of paper, a quill and ink, she tied it off with a short length of rope that had been securing a bundle of cloth. She made her way through the room back to the door, shielding the glow tube in her hand as she got close.

She laid the sack down and pressed her ear to the narrow crack between door and wall, straining her hearing. She heard nothing.

Katya pulled the door open with the bolt handle, slowly opening it to let her gradually see more of the corridor. It was empty. The brigands in the guard room and those by the entrance would still be unconscious, and the two by the fire apparently hadn't been alerted. They

also didn't seem concerned about the fate of their comrade who had gone to check the torches.

*So much for honour among thieves.*

At this point, the smart course of action would have been to simply creep back out of the caves. The heat of her discovery of the statue of Ralmis hadn't faded, however, and Katya wasn't interested in rational decisions.

She closed the door to the strongroom and shut the bolt, securing but not re-locking it. If the plan she was formulating worked, none of the brigands would be opening it again anyways.

Katya slinked down the hallway to the only room she hadn't yet entered, the room of the chieftain. She silently set the bag of goods down before turning her attention to the door. *No lock.* The fear of incurring the chief's wrath was likely enough to keep the lower-tier brigands out.

She could see no light shining from the gap between the door and the cave floor. She gingerly pressed her ear to the door and could hear nothing from the other side except for deep, echoing breaths. It appeared her quarry was firmly in the grip of sleep.

Katya slipped the glow tube into a pocket to hide its light, then prepared a few surprises for the chief. She slowly turned the large knob on the door, which also had been removed and reinstalled from someone else's home, based on the painted flowers and gold-painted 'Lilibeth' labelling the door. She smiled at the ridiculousness of a brutal brigand chieftain sleeping behind a door that had perhaps belonged to a little girl.

Her smile became a lopsided grin that those who knew Katya could tell you was an expression of resolve, not humour. That girl would be getting her door back soon if the elf had her way.

The knob turned easily, and she opened the door a crack. The heavy breathing became louder, but the room was pitch black. She opened the door just wide enough to slip through, then closed it behind her.

The room was about the same size as the bunkroom, but with only one bed, as well as a rough-hewn dresser, table, and chair. The chief's armoured vest and sword belt were hung over one corner of the chair.

The chieftain was a large man, both in girth and height, with a long brown beard and hair to match. He was wearing regular clothing, not nightclothes – clothing that, based on the odor in Katya's sensitive nose, had not been washed properly in some time.

She lifted the sword belt off the chair and deposited it in the furthest corner of the room. She didn't think he was quick enough to get to it where he had hung it, but no sense in taking chances.

The first part of Katya's plan was simple, relying on surprise. She moved next to the dresser, fighting stick in hand. Raising it high overhead, she brought it down on top of the dresser as hard as she could.

In the dark stillness, the sharp sound of wood meeting wood was incredibly loud, so loud that it surprised Katya a bit herself. The chieftain immediately sat up.

"What the bloody...?"

Part two of the plan was a visual distraction. Katya had prepared another one of the small light bombs she had used at the opening to the caves. She threw it in an arc towards the bed, then tucked herself into a ball to shield her eyes.

She heard a muffled 'whump', followed immediately by the chieftain yelling that he couldn't see and attempting to get out of bed.

Katya, crouched, moved quickly to the bed, drawing a dagger as she did. She hopped onto the bed, wrapping her right arm around the still-flailing chief's neck and pushing the dagger in her left hand against his side, directly between two ribs.

"Who the hell are you? What's going...?" His voice was gruff but commanding. He was obviously used to being in charge.

"Shut up," she whispered it into his ear. "If you want to get out of this alive, shut up right now and listen."

The brigand, recognizing that he wasn't dealing with an average intruder, sat heavily on the bed, knowing the situation was firmly out of his hands.

"Your two friends from the firepit will be here in a few seconds. If they open the door and come in, don't say a word. If they knock, tell them to come in because you need help. And that's all you say. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now be quiet."

Sure enough, within a few seconds Katya could hear boots clattering down the corridor. The steps came to a halt outside the door, shortly followed by the pounding of a fist.

"Chief! Chief, are you all right?"

Katya gently poked the tip of the knife into the chieftain's side.

"No! No, I'm hurt. Get your lazy carcasses in here!"

Katya smiled in the darkness. Exactly what they would be expecting. The chieftain was no fool when it came to self-preservation.

As the door opened, Katya shoved the chieftain off the bed towards the table between the bed's frame and the wall. Her hope was that he would get tripped up on the table, giving her the few seconds she needed.

The door crashed open, and she could see the two men from the firepit, illuminated by the torch one of them carried. Katya imagined that it must have been shocking from their perspective – their chief roaring in anger as he attempted to untangle himself from his bedside table and the sleeping furs that had fallen with him, and a black clad elf crouched on the bed.

The guard who was quicker on the uptake began drawing his sword as he moved through the doorway. Before he could clear his waist, however, Katya leapt from the bed, having drawn her final two red darts from a wrist sheath meant for a dagger.

Crouching as she landed, the first guard took a not-very-gentle stab in the thigh, while his partner in the doorway took his in the hip. As soon as the sleeping toxin was delivered. Katya rolled backward, out of sword range, then moved back around the far side of the bed.

She reached out and grabbed the still-struggling chieftain by the back of his collar, pulling hard, and landing him back almost in the same spot she had originally pushed him away from. She resumed both her chokehold and position of her dagger.

Katya looked at the two guards, eyes wide, both shocked at what had just happened. Before they could ask any of the many questions on their minds, they both slumped to the floor.

“That was simple, wasn’t it? Nice and clean. Now, the next few minutes are going to determine whether you get to leave these caves with the chance to give some thought to the life you’ve been leading...”

“Or?”

“Don’t interrupt. It’s not polite.” Katya dug the point of the dagger in ever so slightly, to reinforce her point.

"Or, I kill you right here and now, then maybe kill one or two of your men to send a message to the rest."

Katya had no plans to do so, of course, or she would have done it from the start. Psychology played a huge part in combat though, and for all the chief knew the two men who had come to his aid were dead or dying.

"What do you propose, witch?"

"Calling names isn't polite either. And what I propose is simple. You have one hour to leave. All of you. Without your ill-gotten gains. You go with the armour and weapons on your back and nothing more."

The chieftain began to laugh, a deep, bellowing sound that echoed in the small room.

"Is that all? Perhaps we should float out on golden dust like pixies? Do a little jig on our way out the door? You're just one girl who fate smiled on today and you'll be lucky if we don't gut you slowly when we get back on our feet."

Katya smiled in the dark. "I'm just one, yes. But what makes you think I'm alone?" Katya moved her leg slightly, letting it pin the dagger against the chieftain's side. She removed the glow tube from its pocket, then, in front of the chieftain's face, pulled back her right sleeve.

The lines on her wrist that marked her as an Oathtaker came into view, the red appearing otherworldly in the bluish-green tint of the glow tube. Although Katya couldn't see the man's face, she took a small measure of joy in picturing it.

"Do you recognize that?"

"Yes." It was almost a sigh.

"Go on."

"The mark of an Oathtaker."

"Very good. You know what that means."

"Yes."

“Good. You won’t know who’s watching from now on. Like I told one of your young friends in the bunkroom, you might want to reconsider your line of work.”

Katya once again covered her mark. “Remember, one hour and nothing goes with you.”

She took her last light bomb out, once again shoved the chieftain off the bed and into his table, then flipped the bomb directly in front of him while again closing her own eyes tightly.

Like before, the quiet ‘whump’ of the burst of light was followed by a roar of pain and surprise from the big man.

Katya calmly got off the bed and walked out the still open door, pausing only to retrieve the sack of valuables. While the chieftain blindly thrashed around, yelling for help that wasn’t available, she walked back down the corridor to the firepit room, straining her ears on the off chance that the guard at the back entrance had somehow been alerted to what was happening.

She heard no footsteps, saw nothing move, as she passed through the large cavern back to the entrance corridor. The torch-lighting brigand was steadily breathing in sleep.

When she got closer to the entrance, she again slitted her eyes to minimize the harsh transition between the darkness of the caves and the bright outdoors. After waiting for a minute right at the mouth of the cave, she quickly peeked outside, satisfied to see the first two guards she had dealt with still sleeping as well.

She did some quick math. The sleep toxin she used was potent but would eventually wear off. Within a half hour, the first guards who she had knocked out would be stirring.

Katya made her way back into the wooded area. Remembering to stay well clear of the spider trap, she uncovered the hidden pit and triggered the stump trap and branch, preventing any future wanderers from falling prey to them. There wasn't much she could do with the spider's location without disturbing its home. She ultimately decided to mark the sigil for 'poison' on several of the logs and trees surrounding the wee beast. It wasn't perfect, but it would do.

Before resting, she added one last touch, clearly visible from the path leading away from the caves.

Then, her work done, she found a comfortable patch of shady forest floor to lay on and settled in to wait.

Katya was gambling a bit at this point, as she wasn't sure if the brigands would leave through the main exit or the back one. She didn't doubt that they would leave—no group of criminals wanted to feel like the Oathtakers were riding herd on them. Katya had given the chief a tremendous chance at redemption by not simply wiping out his whole group.

She sipped from her water skin and ate some dried fruit, and soon her patience was rewarded. At the far end of the cliff face bearing the cave opening, a large rock moved away from the cliff, revealing a small tunnel behind it. The chieftain came out first, followed by the rest of his troops. As Katya had directed, none of them were carrying anything except for weapons and armour.

The moment the chief was free of the tunnel, Katya could hear him yelling orders and insults. He was not a man who handled losing well. When the last brigand cleared the tunnel, the chief waved away two others who moved to put the rock back into place. Katya could faintly hear "...leave it..." before the chief gestured towards the forest.

The group, as one, moved for the woods. Katya was lying around twenty paces from the path, camouflaged in a patch of dark shadow and the roots of a tree and could clearly hear and see the disgruntled group move ever closer to her.

The consensus appeared to be that the men were confused and wondering why they had to leave their secure base when it had only been one 'sneaky girl' who had troubled them. The chieftain didn't seem inclined to provide them with any information and simply replied, "Shut your yaps," or some variation, every time he was asked a question.

Katya smiled as they approached the last small twist of the knife she had left for the big man.

As the chieftain reached the point on the trail closest to her, he stopped. In the fading daylight, he had to strain a bit to fully see what Katya had done, and when he did, his lip turned upwards in the snarl of a hungry wolf denied a meal.

It was a simple message, really. Katya had scraped the dark bark from a large bowwood tree at the side of the path, creating a white wooden canvas. Using her finger and the juice of a handful of crushed berries, she had left two symbols. The first was a stylized eye, the second was the red lines of Katya's Oath marking.

As a final touch, one of Katya's regular crossbow bolts was struck directly into the centre of the eye. The meaning was clear – *We'll be watching.*

The chieftain's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"What is it chief? What does that mean?"

He scowled. "It's nothing for you to concern yourselves with if you're too ignorant to figure it out. By the fires of hell, it's clear most of you lot have never had

your arms reach beyond your next mug of ale or the backside of a tavern wench.”

There was assorted mumbling from the group.

“What was that, now? Somethin’ you lot want to get off your minds?”

He was met with silence.

“That’s what I thought. Now move.”

Thoroughly disheartened, the group resumed trudging along the path.

The elf waited ten minutes, just to make sure no one doubled back, before setting out through the woods and making her way back to the grounds of the school.

Aside from an unfortunate run-in with a creeping brittlevine – a carnivorous trailing plant that lived on the forest floor and made up for the delicateness of its vines by being covered with long thorny spikes – that left her with several good gashes in her legs, she made it back to the school with no issue.

Katya once again opened the shrine’s hidden compartment. It was a snug fit, but the sack full of valuables she had brought with her from the caves nestled inside the compartment. She then laid the small statue of Ralmis against the bag, before spending a few minutes making use of the writing tools from the storeroom.

After re-securing the shrine, Katya stopped, said a quiet prayer to the goddess whose likeness she had recovered, then set out towards the inn.

Her walk back was more leisurely than her trip that morning, and by the time she approached town, night insects were making their presence known and the inn was lit with a welcoming yellow glow.

Katya opened the front door and nodded to the innkeeper, who was counting his coins of the day and silently nodded back.

She walked past the doorway to the tavern, which was already filling up, to her room. She sat on the bed with a contented sigh, the fatigue of the day and the satisfaction of a job well done setting in. She removed her armour and weapons, then the dark bodysuit she always wore, before indulging in a hot bath. It cost a bit more to get a room with a bathtub and the water to fill it at most inns, but times like this made it worthwhile.

Once scrubbed, she bound the deep scratches caused by the brittlevine, and dressed in a slightly lighter blue bodysuit than she had been wearing, secured with a leather belt holding a dagger at her hip. She tucked two similar daggers into her tall leather boots and slid two longer and thinner stilettos suitable for throwing into wrist sheaths.

After all, you never knew.

Katya made her way to the now full tavern and found her party had claimed a long table at the back. A few of her fellow warriors appeared to have started indulging before the others and were already sleeping off the effects.

The elf caught Amrada's gaze and was rewarded with a warm smile, and Katya gracefully made her way around various patrons to join her.

Amrada took her hand and lifted it to her lips, kissing fingers that only a few hours prior had been holding the brigand chieftain at bay.

Life was strange.

"So, dear elf, how was your day of foraging?"

"The woods were very kind today."

"Find anything interesting?"

“Absolutely. How did you spend your day?”

Amrada grinned. “Some sparring with the town guard. Nothing too rough and tumble. I was still able to think about tonight.”

Her grin turned mischievous, and she ran a finger down Katya’s cheek. “Just curious...are elves ticklish?”

Katya laughed. “Odd question.” She returned Amrada’s grin. “Some of us are, but it takes a lot of experimenting.”

The elf felt a hand on her thigh.

Amrada leaned in close to Katya’s ear and whispered, “That won’t be a problem. I’ve been fantasizing about experimenting on you all day.”

Katya’s stomach filled with butterflies. “I see.” It took effort to control the tremor in her voice. “My, it’s warm. I think ale is in order.”

Amrada nuzzled the elf’s ear with the tip of her nose, sending shivers down Katya’s back and arms. “That’s fine, but keep in mind I’m ready to leave whenever you are.”

Katya turned to face Amrada and kissed her. “It will be a very quick ale.”

Amrada drained the contents of her mug and stood up.

“Don’t keep me waiting.”

Tossing her long hair, she left the tavern.

Katya made her way to the bar. Throwing down several coins more than needed, she ordered a house ale. It came quickly, cold and refreshing, and Katya drank it at a gulp. She left the mug on the bar, then strolled out.

She wondered how the Sisters were spending their first night once again in the company of their beloved statue.

Katya smiled, reasonably sure that whatever it was would be nowhere near as enjoyable as her evening looked.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a quiet chapel, several of the Sisters sat around a table. Flickering candlelight threw dancing shadows on the wall. They could have lit the large oil lamps but had decided that the gentle, playful glow of candlelight was more appropriate.

The Head Sister opened a scroll bound with a small vine, having found the paper next to the statue Katya had recovered. She laid it on the table, smoothing it so it could be properly seen. Within a few minutes, all the Sisters around the table were crying, laughing or some combination of both.

This is what they read:

*Sisters of Ralmis,*

*I am happy to have been able to recover your statue. While the surroundings I found her in were not her usual welcoming home, she is a resourceful deity and had made the best of her situation.*

*As requested, I did not take the lives of any of the brigands responsible, although I believe I knocked several years from the lives of more than one. I persuaded their chieftain that thieving is a poor choice of occupation and that the Oathtakers have taken a personal interest in him. He won't be back, nor will his men.*

*While I appreciated the kind offering of gold you left, the Oathtakers maintain us with what we need. Please use the money to continue your good works by showing young girls that they can become anything they set their minds and spirits to.*

*The bag of valuables was, unfortunately, all I could take with me from the caves. I would ask that you please begin returning the property to its owners, most of whom will likely be close by the school.*

*There is a large room at the back of the caves, with a closed (but not locked) wooden door. Behind that door lie more valuables, as well as many mundane things the brigands acquired. I would suggest that a large party of citizens, well-equipped with torches, could make short work of emptying the room and putting the contents back to their original use.*

*Righting the small evils of the world is as important as killing mountain serpents or capturing pirate lords; while it may not always be quickly, I will always come if the Sisters have need of me.*

*Your humble servant,  
Katya Greenleaf, Oathtaker.'*

# PRIDE

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## About the Author

J.B. Knowles has been a lifelong lover of works of fantasy, first creating Katya and the Greenleaf family in high school as roleplaying characters.

After a long career in the fields of justice and mental health, J.B. finally had a chance to build a full world on paper for Katya and to breathe new life into adventures started over thirty years ago.

J.B. is married and has two sons and three dogs who all share an stately old farmhouse in a quiet corner of Canada.

J.B. Knowles loves to hear from readers. You can find their contact information, website details and author profile page at <https://www.pride-publishing.com>